

# International Education and the Early Language Classroom

Vivien Stewart and Heather Singmaster



## Introduction

In June 2001, Asia Society's National Commission on Asia in the Schools released its report which concluded that "young Americans are dangerously uninformed about international matters" (National Commission on Asia in the Schools, 2001, p. 6). Since then, Asia Society has been leading a major national initiative to stimulate teaching and learning about the history, geography, cultures, and languages of Asia and other world regions in America's schools. In this article we explore the crucial relationship between the early language classroom and the international knowledge and skills that are so vital in the 21st century.

In the past, international transactions were largely the domain of diplomats and international businessmen. But today, knowledge of the world can no longer be a luxury reserved for a few. International education will be needed by all American citizens. Children today will be:

- Selling to the world
- Buying from the world
- Working for international companies
- Managing employees from other countries and cultures
- Competing with people on the other side of the world for jobs and markets
- Working with people all over the world in joint ventures
- Solving global problems such as AIDS, avian flu, air and water pollution, and disaster recovery (*North Carolina in the World*, 2005).
- Over 300 state leaders from 26 states have participated in four State Institutes on International Education in the Schools.<sup>1</sup> As a result, 18 states have developed initiatives to promote greater knowledge of other world regions, languages, and cultures through initiatives such as task forces, statewide conferences, revision of curriculum standards, professional development and technology initiatives, international partnerships and exchanges, and legislation.
- The Goldman Sachs Foundation Prizes for Excellence in International Education created by The Goldman Sachs Foundation and Asia Society are recognizing schools, higher education programs, and media/technology programs that are promoting the development of international knowledge and languages in imaginative ways and that provide models and best practices for others. More than 400 institutions from 34 states have applied for recognition—testament to a growing grassroots interest in international education.
- The College Board is creating new Advanced Placement courses for high schools in Chinese, Japanese, Italian, and Russian to begin fall 2006.
- Asia Society and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are developing the first-ever network of urban International Studies Secondary Schools in several cities and states. The schools teach international content across the curriculum, offer Asian languages as well as European ones and connect electronically to schools in other parts of the world.

International Education is generally taken to include: knowledge of other world regions, cultures, and global/international issues; skills in communicating in languages other than English, working in global or cross-cultural environments, and using information from different sources around the world; and values of respect and concern for other cultures and peoples.

Since the release of the 2001 report, the international education initiative has taken off on many levels, from state to national and in selected school districts and classrooms across the country:

<sup>1</sup> Organized by Asia Society and cosponsored by the Business Roundtable, Committee for Economic Development, Council of Chief State School Officers, Education Commission of the States, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Coalition on International Studies in the Schools, National Conference of State Legislatures, and National Governors Association. For further information visit: [www.InternationalEd.org](http://www.InternationalEd.org)



## International education can begin in the early language classroom

How does exposing children to other cultures and languages in the early years benefit their development?

First, teaching students about the world can influence the social and emotional development of young children—mitigating prejudice and giving them the skills to resolve conflict peacefully. Humans are not born prejudiced against other humans; it is a response to the social environment, reflecting among other things, the need to be affiliated with a group and for adherence to cultural and subcultural norms. If we can constructively expose children to different cultures at a young age, we can reduce the development of prejudice. Simultaneously, this can influence the development of pro-social behavior and foster nonviolent problem solving (Hamburg & Hamburg, 2004).

Some researchers have begun to study the development of “intercultural competence” in students and adults. Intercultural competence has been commonly defined as: knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one’s self. Linguistic competence also plays a role (Deardorff, 2004). For students to develop intercultural competence, they must learn: respect (valuing other cultures); openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other countries); and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty), all things that can be taught through an emphasis on other cultures in the early language classroom.

Second, there are cognitive benefits to providing children experiences with other languages and cultures. Learning another language can give Americans insight into the nature of language and culture—including their own. Indeed, the nature of their mother tongue determines the nature of the ideas and thoughts that people can have. Learning a second language, gives students a reference point that offers them insights into the particular nature of their own mother tongue and culture. And students who learn one foreign language have the ability to learn other languages more quickly than students who have never had foreign language training; meaning these students will be primed to quickly learn the critical languages of tomorrow. Early language learners develop mental flexibility, giving them the ability to shift between symbol systems (mathematics and literacy) with ease, in addition to improving abilities in divergent thinking, metalinguistic awareness, and, occasionally, higher scores on measures of verbal intelligence (Met, 2004).

## Examples of Schools that are Integrating International Knowledge and Skills

Through The Goldman Sachs Foundation Prizes for Excellence in International Education, we have been able to identify schools that are pioneers in integrating international education into not just their language classes, but throughout the curriculum. For example:

### Glastonbury Public Schools

Glastonbury Public Schools in Connecticut have a long tradition of focusing on the importance of teaching about the world. Central to this is foreign language instruction from kindergarten through 12th grade. The foreign language curriculum is thematic and interdisciplinary and linked at all levels to the study of other cultures and global issues. Foreign languages are offered at all schools in the district: Spanish is taught to all students in grades 1-5; in middle school students are given the choice of continuing with Spanish or beginning a study of French, Russian, Latin, or Japanese; and in high school students can start a second foreign language as well. Finally, all students at a K-5 desegregation magnet school, shared with East Hartford Public Schools, study Japanese.

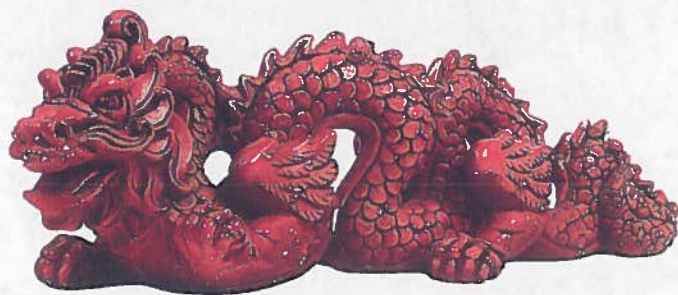
In the primary grades students learn languages without textbooks. Grammar, vocabulary, and language structures are still emphasized but are tied to instruction in other subjects, especially social studies and language arts. The Spanish teacher keeps track of the curriculum in other classes so that she can tie in the language lesson, making the classes more meaningful

to the students. For instance, when students in second grade learn about Mexico as their neighbor to the south, the Spanish teacher might focus on Mexico’s geography.

Teachers in Glastonbury have created a K-12 sequence of classes on world cultures and global issues that culminate in high school, with every student taking one of five interdisciplinary area studies classes (Africa, East Asia, India and Southeast Asia; Islamic World; or Latin America and the Caribbean). A course on world religions and a yearlong Civics/Current Issues course in which students must master international policy issues from a U.S. perspective and from foreign frames of reference, complete the sequence. Proficient in a second language and knowledgeable about other world cultures, students from Glastonbury have gone on to a wide range of international careers. Many families now move into the district because of the schools’ mission of infusing an understanding of world cultures, languages, and global issues throughout the school day.







## Chinese American International School

Another leader in early language and cultures instruction is the Chinese American International School (CAIS), an independent school in San Francisco, California that operates the largest fulltime elementary program teaching Chinese to English-speaking students. CAIS is not a school that teaches Chinese as a foreign language. Rather, students are immersed in both languages and both cultures. Students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade study all subjects in both Mandarin and English, with a special emphasis on Chinese history, culture and values. Students study a rigorous curriculum that includes language arts, social studies, math and science. Students in pre-K through grade 5 spend half the day in English and half in Chinese. In social studies they learn the importance of family and the differences between family relationships in China and the United States. In math, students study word problems in both Chinese and English. Students running for student government must give speeches in both languages. The speeches in Chinese must follow the more formal structures expected in Chinese culture. Students also visit with elderly Mandarin speakers at a local retirement home and ask them about experiences in China when they were young. And partnerships with schools in China reinforce the learning of both language and culture.

The success of the Chinese American International School is evident from the success of its graduates and the large number of applications. "We have developed students who are comfortable in two languages and two cultures," says head-of-school, Andrew Corcoran. "It's a potent story and an extremely important one for the times in which we are living" (Sachar, 2004, 17). The Chinese American International School is now working with schools throughout northern California to introduce the study of Chinese culture and languages into public schools.

## John Stanford International School

The John Stanford International School, a public partial-immersion elementary school that serves an ethnically diverse population in Seattle, Washington, requires students to spend half of their day learning in English (reading, writing and social studies classes), the other half in either Japanese or Spanish (math, science, culture and literacy in their chosen language). Thus children see two primary teachers during the day but they stay with these teachers for two years.

The language immersion approach and the ethnic diversity of the students provide a natural environment for the schools' global education backbone. International content appears across all curricular areas, including math and science. A local arts organization provides artists-in-residence to teach

students about world dance, music and visual arts. John Stanford has "adopted" two schools, one in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico and one in Tanzania for which students raise funds and with which they communicate through email exchanges.

## Glendover Global Studies Academy

The Glendover Global Studies Academy in Lexington, Kentucky is a suburban public school serving about 600 students. Twenty-two percent of the student body is learning English as a second language and international students represent 30 countries. Just as global studies is at the center of the schools' name, it is the central focus of the school's curriculum approach. Glendover offers a foreign language awareness program, in which students are exposed to one language over a two-year period and then introduced to a new language. These languages include Japanese, Spanish, French and German. Classes are generally taught by native speakers, often parents. The goal is not proficiency, but cultural and linguistic awareness and to provide a basis for student language interest and choice at middle and high school. The language program is closely tied to the rest of the curriculum: each grade level focuses on specific countries which are studied throughout the curriculum.

Examples of the school's international education focus can be found in every curriculum area. In science, Glendover has used the GLOBE program to collect climate data, compare it with that collected by students in other countries and relay it to NASA and NOAA. The school has an innovative global approach to economics education with an "international money museum" and "elephant economics." In each grade level's focus on specific countries, students learn about the geography, history and language of the country and produce their own versions of its art and music in an annual school-wide international fair.





## Recommendations

These schools are wonderful and varied examples of the power of teaching language and culture, beginning in the earliest grades. But these kinds of environments can be created by dedicated teachers in other schools too. The lessons from these and other pioneering schools include:

*Dream big, start slow, be flexible*

- Take the time to plan how to integrate international education into your class and take it one step and one course at a time.

*Secure community buy-in and find passionate defenders*

- Involve parents and local business leaders. They understand the needs of the community and can support and encourage international education.<sup>2</sup>

*Expect to supplement textbooks*

- Because most foreign language textbooks do not provide cross-cutting content, you may have to supplement with outside materials such as foreign newspapers or online curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

*Emphasize world language mastery and international exchange*

- A desire to travel often goes hand-in-hand with the devotion to studying a foreign language. Encourage your students to participate in international exchanges, which also help to hone their language skills and give them first-hand knowledge of the culture they are studying.

*Embrace technology*

- If students are unable to travel, try technology alternatives such as videoconferencing, e-mail pen pals, and web quests. Language labs and learning how to use a computer in another language are also helpful tools for learning a language.

*Find teachers who are lifetime learners*

- Teachers with a passionate desire to learn provide their students with a richer educational experience. They continue to travel and learn new skills which are passed on in the classroom.

Ultimately, making such schools widely available will require a national policy commitment. Improving our nation's international knowledge and skills is vital to our future prosperity and international relations. For fifty years, the federal government has played a critical role in fostering foreign languages and area studies expertise in higher education. This commitment now needs to be extended to K-12 education as an urgent priority.

## References

- Center for International Understanding. (April 2005). *North Carolina in the world: A plan to increase student knowledge and skills about the world*. Raleigh, NC: The University of North Carolina. Retrieved February 21, 2006 from [http://ciu.northcarolina.edu/content.php/docs/NCWorld\\_ActionPlan.pdf](http://ciu.northcarolina.edu/content.php/docs/NCWorld_ActionPlan.pdf)
- Deardorff, D. K. B. (2004.) *The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization at Institutions of higher education in the United States*. Retrieved February 20, 2006 from <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/theses/available/etd-06162004-000223/unrestricted/etd.pdf>
- Hamburg, D., & Hamburg, B. (2004). *Learning to live together: Preventing hatred and violence in child and adolescent development*. Oxford: University Press.
- Met, M. (November 2004). Improving students' capacity in foreign languages. *Phi Delta Kappan* 86(3), 214-218.
- National Commission on Asia in the Schools. (2001). *Asia in the Schools: Preparing young Americans for today's interconnected world*. New York: Asia Society.
- Sachar, E. (2004). *Schools for the Global Age: Promising practices in international education*. New York: Asia Society.



Vivien Stewart is Vice President for Education at the Asia Society. She is responsible for Asia Society's work with national and state policymakers and with schools, teachers and curriculum developers to promote the study of Asia and other world regions, cultures and languages. Before working at Asia Society, Ms. Stewart directed the education and child development programs at Carnegie Corporation of New York and was Senior Policy Advisor to the UN Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict. Ms. Stewart serves as a trustee of the National Center on Education and the Economy, the Longview Foundation for Education in International Understanding and World Affairs and the Refugee Education Trust.



Heather Singmaster is a Program Associate in the Education Program at Asia Society. Her work primarily focuses on state and national policy. She previously worked at the Council on Foreign Relations and the American Association for the Advancement of Science and holds a Masters degree focused in Anthropology from New York University.

<sup>2</sup>A World-Class Education: Community Action Kit. For more information: <http://internationalled.org/planningtools/home.htm>

<sup>3</sup>Some curriculum resources for Asia can be found on our website: [www.AskAsia.org](http://www.AskAsia.org)